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THE PRESENT STATUS OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY IN GERMANY

KARL BORNHAUSEN
University of Marburg, Germany

A subject such as this submitted by the editors of the *American Journal of Theology* involves by its very nature the greatest difficulties, for, of all the problems of reflection, the most difficult is to comprehend aright, and to pass judgment on, the present. We must waive for the present the fact that a scientific judgment in this matter cannot exist, and only bear in mind, that, because of the impossibility of taking a bird's-eye view of the present religious situation, a one-sided exposition, which will inevitably bear the stamp of the author's prejudices and peculiarities, will of necessity be the result. No theologian can write concerning the present without considering himself as a part of that present, and without permitting his own participation in the movements to influence him.

Because of this it is imperative that problems of the contemporary situation must be repeatedly re-examined. It is the privilege and the duty of the theologian from time to time to survey the ways in which the religious spirit is developing, to ascertain what new directions it is taking, to determine which ideas are active and which are not, and to ascertain at what point the theologian himself can most profitably and clearly relate the forces of his own thinking to the situation. Of supreme importance is it that he shall choose the proper period for such a survey, and that he shall trace the lines of thought with great care in order to determine whether they are discontinued, or whether they lead out into the future. Even our age with its rapid movements of life should not take it for granted that religious ideas change every year; the slight oscillations of faith, whose significance for the present we are too apt to overestimate, combine to make genuine progress only after decades.

The period taken for our brief survey of the liberal theology of Germany is prescribed for us by current theological controversies rather than by the process of historical development. At the present time orthodoxy in Germany, inspired by its doubtful good fortune in the application of compulsory discipline in ecclesiastical politics, jubilantly proclaims the impending dissolution of liberal theology. "The pessimism of ebbing vitality" is said to show itself in progressive theology and to indicate that the end is near.¹ The childlike naïveté which in orthodox circles assumes the success of compulsory discipline to be a triumph of the spirit is so ridiculous that serious-minded men have long since ceased to make any reply to such assertions. In rebuttal the critical theology can point to the theological encyclopedia, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, the final volume of which has just appeared.² The fact that so monumental a work has been brought to completion by a group of scientific German theologians and that this work is being more and more used and approved by the reading world in Germany furnishes abundant proof that the liberal theology is still in the ascendant.

It is indeed true that the circumstances of development in liberal theology have altered in so far as the generally prevalent greater tendency toward a practical emphasis has been gaining in German religious circles. This condition of affairs is of great advantage to the church; it has already increased to more than three thousand the number of theological students³ which at one time had declined to nearly two thousand. But unfortunately this increase in numbers brings a stronger emphasis on ecclesiastical advance and on professional interests rather than a higher standard of scientific achievements. The emphasis on what is practical and the desire for security in one's position everywhere bring dangers to science.

Now in this desire for practical activity there is a very important

¹ Cf. an anonymous article concerning Troeltsch in *Allgemeine Evangelische Kirchenzeitung*, August 22, 1913, and one by Dunkmann in *Konservative Monatshefte*, July and August, 1913.

² Tübingen: Siebeck, 5 Bände, 1909-1913.

³ We had in the winter term, 1913-14, 3,903 students of Protestant theology in Germany.

fundamental element of religious life which ought never to be overlooked. It is only when practical activity leads to political compromise and compulsion, substituting utilitarian motives for free conviction, that it is vicious and dangerous. A church which is controlled by one party must constantly be on its guard lest it unintentionally cultivate such bad feelings. That totally different kind of practical enthusiasm, however, which seeks genuinely to serve men, which attempts to maintain and to increase the emotional powers of religion, and which resolves to revive in all their former strength the historical values of faith—such a practical enthusiasm is necessary and indispensable. As a matter of fact, it has never been lacking in the liberal theology.

The position of the liberal theology is historically determined by the opposition between scientific investigation and ecclesiastical needs. Ever since Schleiermacher this opposition has been clearly recognized in theology; even orthodoxy has been compelled to take account of *both* sides; otherwise how could it have developed the modern conservative theology? Indeed, in all theological circles it is today recognized that a union of scientific method and of practical purpose is essential for theology. The emphasis, however, is very differently placed by different men; and programs which read very much alike may mean very different things. There should be especially noted the difficulty that as a matter of fact a theology holding to the old forms of faith is unable even with the best of intentions to see clearly the profound seriousness of scientific endeavor, while on the other side science, when working with religious material, is often unable to furnish a real understanding of the innermost nature of its object of investigation. These two defects are easily comprehensible; and they would be much more readily corrected if fanaticism and the desire for domination did not stand in the way of clear vision and fair dealing.

From the very first, the task of liberal theology has been one of mediation; consequently it will seek to bring into closer relations theory and practice, science and religion, in as pure a form as possible. In contrast to this policy, orthodoxy has engaged in politics. It at first excluded science from the religious realm; then,

finding this position untenable, constructed a science acceptable to itself on religious foundations, making use of either Catholic-rational or of pietistic-other-worldly principles. Here the presuppositions revert to the type of thought previous to Kant and to the *Aufklärung*, and previous also to Schleiermacher and his conception of the nature of religion, even though in form and language, and particularly in references to the literature, the procedure may appear to be very modern. It is unfortunate that so much strength should here be expended in a false opposition to liberal theology, when co-operative work on the part of conservatives in dealing with the religious and theological presuppositions dominating the progress of the nineteenth-century theology would mean great enrichment and progress for liberal theology and thus for the entire religious situation. In spite of the fact that from a scientific point of view both theological parties are constantly coming closer together, they seem doomed to mutual misunderstanding in that neither party reads the contributions of the other, but both engage in criticism on the basis of hearsay, allowing the actual principles at stake to disappear beneath sharp personal animosity. Passion is the curse of all religion. Since for years the liberal theology has been the object of unjust and offensive attacks on the part of the right wing, it has therefore retired from its attitude of calmness and quiet.¹ From this attitude of personal aggressiveness on the part of liberal theology, however, we may immediately conclude that it is scarcely yet time to dig its grave. We may rather characterize it in the words of Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Let one undertake what is right and give to it all one's strength, the reward is always immeasurable, whether fate shall crown one's effort with success or not." The consciousness of being in the right is evident in liberal theology from the suggestive answers which it attempts to give to the two most pressing questions of our day, viz.: What is religion? and What is Christianity?

1. It is an immediate evidence of the correctness of the procedure of critical theology that it has given no single or final answer to the first question. Recent science has rendered to religion a

¹ We need only call attention to the more passionate *Fälle* (cases of ecclesiastical discipline), especially the cases of Jatho and Traub.

valuable service in showing how intimately religion is interwoven with all of the expressions of human culture. If ever radical scientific conclusions proceeded to depict religion as a spiritual phenomenon of secondary importance, or indeed to dispense with it as superfluous, this stage of criticism has quickly become obsolete. Indeed even natural science has yielded to the speculative impulse and has established a monistic religion.

Since Schleiermacher, religion has appeared as a thoroughly unique phenomenon of the soul and yet as interwoven with all other activities of the soul; consequently the task of science has been to set forth this relationship between religion and the life of culture. The difficulty of accomplishing this many-sided task inevitably gave rise to a division of the field of labor. Investigators gave more or less exclusive attention to the historical, or to the psychological, or to the epistemological, or to the ethical aspects of religion. Thus arose the various systematic efforts in the theology of the nineteenth century which paved the way for an all-inclusive understanding of religion within the realm of culture.

If we restrict ourselves here to the immediate present, we may first call attention to three attempts at a systematic solution of the problem, "religion and knowledge." None of these attempts has yet proved itself to be entirely satisfactory; still, taken together, they prove the correctness of the direction in which they are moving. I refer to the attempts of Troeltsch, Otto, and Wobbermin, who seek to set religion in positive relation to science.

Since Troeltsch recently set forth his point of view in an article entitled "The Dogmatics of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,"¹ I need to say only a few words concerning his fundamental ideas as to the relation between science and religion. Religion in its relation to science seems to be interwoven with both psychology and history. It is impossible to demonstrate an exceptional historical position for religion. It is rather true that in history religion appears as relative, allied with other phenomena of culture. The scientific classification of religion cannot be reached through history but only through philosophy. The rational, epistemological investigation of religion which Troeltsch undertakes inevitably

¹ *American Journal of Theology*, January, 1913, pp. 1-11.

brings us back to the psychology of religion. Psychology, however, furnishes merely the empirical material out of whose irrational content the process of knowledge rationalizes religion. Moreover, this rational process of religious knowledge must base itself on the religious a priori, which is the epistemological presupposition of religion, in analogy to the logical, ethical, and aesthetic a priori elements in other realms. For this reason the religious a priori is brought into peculiarly close relationship with the ethical a priori since the same principles of validity are binding for both. On the psychology and epistemology of religion is built the historical-philosophical interpretation of religion which the rational unfolding of religion must discover in history. It is here that the relatively highest content of historical Christianity comes to light. Finally, the metaphysics of religion must undertake the philosophical; speculative treatment of the idea of God. In harmony with idealism, the originality of religion is here set forth in disclosing the new beginnings and new realities of the life of the spirit. This relating of the religious conception of God and the scientific world view receives in dogmatics a personal-practical coloring. According to this conception of the philosophy of religion, one is not concerned with proofs of religion but simply with its rational classification among the activities of the human spirit. The affirmation of religion is always a consequence of faith, not of knowledge; nevertheless the effort of man in the direction of knowledge has to care for the rational character of faith.¹

The same desire for a rational comprehension of religion is seen in Otto's attempt to connect his philosophy of religion with the epistemological principles of the philosopher Fries.² Otto also defines the religious problem on the basis of Kant and Schleiermacher. He wishes to determine and to establish the unique character of religion; but he desires to do this by rational means. This necessity for a rational foundation leads him to revive the theory of an immediate knowledge with which Fries attempted to construct his philosophical system. Fries erected upon the psy-

¹ See my article on Troeltsch in the theological lexicon *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, V, 1360 ff; references to literature will be found there.

² Kantisch-Fries'sche *Religionsphilosophie*, Tübingen, 1909.

chological theory of immediate knowledge a graduated epistemological series rich in spiritual content, but rationally difficult to conceive. He crowned this series with the three functions: knowledge, faith, and intuition (*Wissen, Glauben, Ahndung*). All the intellectual activities of man share in these, and religion particularly is determined by all three. By seizing this almost forgotten doctrine and attempting to make Fries's theory of emotion render service to religion again, Otto involved the concept of religion in all the terminological difficulties and in the epistemological schematism of the philosophy of Fries. Thus he failed to assign sufficient independence to the religious aspect of life. Thus, although Otto's attempt is quite in harmony with modern metaphysical movements in theology, his attachment to an unquestionably suggestive but formally antiquated and obscure epistemology was unfortunate.¹ The further development of his ideas in the realm of the history of religion, which Otto is now undertaking, may give to his one-sided psychological-rational principles the needed breadth and may adapt them to the speculative needs of the present.²

In opposition to Otto, Wobbermin, in working out his conception of the basis of religion, has attached himself to the modern position of William James. In the first volume of his work on systematic theology, entitled *Die religionspsychologische Methode in Religionswissenschaft und Theologie*,³ he attempts to unite the pure psychological approach of Schleiermacher and the empirical approach of James, in order thus to attain a genuinely rational definition of religion. The truth-interest of religion like the truth-interest of knowledge in general becomes the link between science and religion, and under the impulse of this interest both the need of exact knowledge and the emotional longing to be certain of one's salvation can find satisfaction.

All three of these theological essays bear the marks of incompleteness. They are sketches which need further elaboration and

¹ See my articles "Wider den Neofriesianismus in der Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 1911 and 1912; also "Das religiöse Apriori bei Troeltsch und Otto," *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, Bd. 139 (1911), p. 193.

² See his address "Ist eine Universalreligion möglich?" given at the World Congress of Liberal Religion in Paris, 1913, *Christliche Welt*, No. 52, 1913, pp. 1237 ff.

³ Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913.

criticism, but they are for that very reason full of promise. By contrast, philosophy appears to be too hasty in its discussion of the religious problem and to underestimate its real value and depth. The stimulus which Eucken's theology gave to theology too quickly shifts to the suggestion that philosophy itself is in a position to solve religious problems.¹ And the pupils of Eucken have hastily advanced to claim the religious realm for themselves and for their bold emphatic assertions. This circumstance gives to current liberal theology the feeling that too close an alliance with philosophy has inevitably been harmful. The philosophers constantly incline to the settled conviction that they are masters of all problems, and that theology must await from them suggestions for the solution of its problems. This, however, is absolutely false; for in most cases the philosopher inevitably misunderstands or disregards the fundamental fact that religion lies between theory and practice, a fact which we actually observe and which we must presuppose. Therefore, theology itself is compelled to formulate the problems of the philosophy of religion and itself to furnish the necessary philosophical work as the three above-mentioned theological thinkers have attempted to do.

Although in recent times the answer to the question, "What is religion?" has been sought by the aid of the theoretical reason, nevertheless the earlier attempts to investigate religion as a problem of the *practical reason* have not entirely lost their power. Especial importance attaches to the ideas coming from Wilhelm Herrmann, or due to his influence. The complete separation between scientific knowledge and religious experience has enabled his theology to become closely identified with the practical ecclesiastical interests; and it is noteworthy that orthodoxy has gradually assumed a hospitable attitude toward his teachings, in spite of the fact that his theology with its rejection of all legal authority in doctrine and its assertion of the complete autonomy of faith must be inherently unwelcome to conservatives. It is significant that it is to the practical emphasis of Herrmann's theology that this irenic influence is due. Recently Herrmann in his little book,

¹ Cf. my monograph, *Der religiöse Wahrheitsbegriff in der Philosophie Rudolf Euckens*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1910.

Die mit der Theologie verknüpfte Not der evangelischen Kirche und ihre Ueberwindung,¹ has again shown how his fundamentally mediating and ecclesiastically practical theology can offer guidance to the faith of the church. Religion appears as a fact which rescues men from guilt and anxiety, which is guaranteed through feeling alone, and based upon the ideas in which Jesus shared his faith with his disciples. The emancipation of the inner man, however, is possible only by the conquest of moral weakness and sin through complete trust in a pure higher personal life. Herrmann's genuinely acute and accurate psychological observation here makes central a moral phenomenon of human society, which is by no means accidental, but which is in fact ethically and religiously fundamental.

It is this *ethical* foundation of the theology of the Ritschlian school that gives it its relationship to the neo-Kantian philosophy—a relationship which, for a time, appeared to be one of direct dependence. As a matter of fact, the Ritschlian theology has never been thus dependent; but Herrmann simply employed the keenly critical view of science set forth by the neo-Kantians in order to separate science and morality and thus to achieve freedom for religion. The neo-Kantians, on the contrary, are constantly seeking to draw religion into their scientific ethics, and to represent religion as a phenomenon necessary indeed but not fundamental for the life of the spirit. Although the leaders of the school—Cohen in *Kants Begründung der Ethik*,² and Natorp in *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Humanität*³ have furnished valuable contributions to the understanding of religion, they seem to have no followers to pursue inquiries in this direction and it looks as if the neo-Kantian school were ceasing to maintain an inwardly appreciative attitude toward the religious problem and a corresponding philosophical consideration of the subject. This is greatly to the disadvantage of this school which in this point is behind the position of modern speculative philosophy. For the mutual relation between ethics and religion continues to be the

¹ Tübingen: Siebeck, 1913.

² 12. Aufl. Berlin: Cassirer, 1910.

³ 2. Aufl. Tübingen: Siebeck, 1908; cf. my review in *Christliche Welt*, 1909, No. 10.

most promising and important subject of investigation, and the exact nature of this relationship can be clearly ascertained only by the mutual criticism of theologians and philosophers. For such labor, however, there must necessarily be presupposed on both sides an understanding and a love for both objects of investigation.

We must now mention the attempts to ascertain the nature of religion from the *aesthetic* point of view. Efforts of this sort are for the most part of an artistic rather than a scientific character, and therefore are more influential in the realm of popular religion than in that of theology. It is noteworthy that an aesthetic mysticism has found comparatively widespread acceptance; it is based partially on a monistic foundation (Wilhelm Bölsche); and it finds acceptance partially in the societies of Freemasonry and Free Thought (the Horneffer Brothers and Bruno Wille, the monthly *Die Tat* [Jena: Diederichs]). Since these religious movements are for the most part unsystematic, they are of importance for theology only as signs of the times. Otto is the only theologian who has thus far attempted to establish scientifically a relationship between religion and aesthetics; and here he is simply a follower of Fries.¹ Aesthetic feeling appears closely related to religious feeling, and the use of symbols for artistic and religious ideas serves to bring these into closest connection. Apart from the valuable emphasis on the significance of symbols for both art and religion, these conceptions are still too indefinite to have exercised much influence on theology. Still there has been a certain amount of critical examination of this theological attempt in which the significance of the religious-aesthetic problem is at least being fully recognized.² It looks, however, as if theology had not yet gone far enough in its epistemological problem to be able to devote itself to the difficult task of examining the relation between religion and aesthetics. Clear as it is to us since Schiller and Schleiermacher that both realms are spiritually related, it is equally necessary to preserve their mutual independence and integrity.

The foregoing discussion shows that the scientific theology in

¹ Cf. the above-mentioned *Kantisch-Fries'sche Religionsphilosophie*.

² Georg Weiss, *Fries' Lehre von der Ahndung in Aesthetik, Religion und Ethik*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1912.

Germany has not prematurely settled the problem of the basis of religion, but that, while making general progress, it is devoting itself to the task of making much richer and more comprehensive developmental possibilities for the future. This fact gives assurance that it is on the right track.

2. At first it seems as if we have a more complicated situation in regard to the answer to the second question which we suggested, viz., What is Christianity? Owing to the fact that the discussion of this problem has been carried on too much in public and popular ways, so that right of way has been given to both pious ignorance and skeptical dilletantism, conclusions have been too hastily formulated. It is, of course, true that this question stands much closer than the other to the general interests of faith and that the welfare of Christianity seems to demand an immediate answer to it. As if science had the power to introduce confusion into genuine religious life! It can disturb only a pseudo-religion.

The problem of the nature of Christianity has developed in current theology in two quite distinct directions. In the first place it was the problem of the relation between Christianity and history which led to serious disturbance. After the abandonment of the mediaeval belief that the New Testament narrative was essentially super-historical, the progress of the scientific dissolution of Christian tradition could not be halted. Close upon the discovery that it was impossible to reconstruct a "life of Jesus" followed a criticism of the words of Jesus. A clear distinction was made between Christ and Jesus. The clearer the traits of the Christ of dogma became, the more doubtful did historians feel as to the possibility of finding in the New Testament definite knowledge concerning historical fact. As a consequence it was felt to be increasingly difficult to base affirmations of faith on historical uncertainties; and there was a rapid advance to the sensational attempt to renounce history entirely and to eliminate even the remnants of historical fact through radical hypotheses. Along with the vigorous attacks on the historicity of Jesus came the religious attempts of Kalthoff and Jatho to set forth a Christianity without historical credentials. Under these circumstances it has become impossible for scientific theology to defend its own cautious

position over against daring hypotheses and to preserve calmness of spirit. On the other hand, orthodoxy made use of these extravagances of critical method to direct the severest attacks against the piety and the character of the critical theologians. Thus in the past months Heitmüller's extremely calm and clear exposition of the character of Jesus has been the subject of the most painful suspicions. This very exposition of Heitmüller's has the great positive value of firmly establishing a certain amount of genuine tradition concerning Jesus in opposition to all superficial criticism. For that very reason it was obliged to maintain an attitude of careful objectivity and personal restraint.¹

In the face of this thoroughgoing scientific research it is impossible for the dogmatic theologian to retire behind the faith of Christ. Liberal theology must reckon more clearly than it thus far has with the consequence resulting from the lessening and the uncertainty of the tradition concerning Jesus. The consciousness of value in relation to history must be so altered as to lay emphasis not so much upon bare fact as upon the spiritual significance and continued influence of the facts. So far as this problem is concerned, just now, everything is in a state of flux. At present there does not exist any clear systematic attempt to set forth the significance of Jesus for Christian faith in accordance with the recent results of historical criticism. But it is better that this problem should wait until the intense religious prejudice against the liberal theologians shall have given place to confidence in their earnestness and reverence. As a preparation for this work attention must now be given to the other more important scientific question which Christianity today presents.

The second difficulty which Christian faith today encounters is perhaps less evident but not less fundamental. It concerns the bringing of the Christian realm of ideas into the general field of culture. Not only the origin of Christianity but also its development is interwoven in the general history of intellectual life. For this reason Christianity frequently appears as a syncretistic and somewhat inconsistent whole, which, because of this character, can represent only a relatively high culture value. Its religious

¹ W. Heitmüller, *Jesus*. Tübingen: Siebeck, 1913.

ideas and power seem to be parallel with vigorous life-movements which along with it and through it come to full validity. The triumph of the individual, which up to the present has been emphasized in Christianity, is supplemented by powerful sociological influences which formerly received slight attention. Society is now being raised to a constituent factor of equal importance.¹ The idea of redemption is connected with the work of all founders and promoters of ethical religious culture and attains its full efficacy only in society. Revelation likewise appears as a psychological phenomenon which must receive a sociological interpretation, and which establishes quite novel lines of connection in social groups. The individual loses his one-sided valuation in religion, and the attempt is made to place the individual and society on the same level in Christianity as well as in profane life. Personal religious convictions press to attach themselves to the great social movements of the human spirit. Anxiety for one's own soul retires behind the desire to serve the soul of humanity. These are powerful alterations of the Christian religious attitude which have been evoked by recent historical and psychological judgments and conceptions.

If, as a result of this point of view, Christianity loses its absoluteness in the general stream of religious phenomena, it nevertheless in this way attains the capacity to assert itself as the dominating spiritual factor in culture. Because of the fact that it subordinates all values of the human spirit and of economic culture, of the individual soul and of society, to the primary religious ideal of self-denial and voluntary dependence on the directing will of God and upon the universal moral command of brotherly love, it gives new and universally valid power again to the indispensable symbolic representations which were effective in the personality of Jesus and in the first Christian community. But these ideals now for the first time receive a world-encompassing significance, since their historical permanence through the centuries of ancient and varying forms of complicated culture has thus proved that an enthusiastic wave of faith has now grown to be the Christian world-religion. This development is comprehensible to the theologian

¹ Troeltsch, *Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen*, Tübingen, 1912.

today only as he understands the moral-religious forces of Christianity in their connection with the world-process of development, and learns to comprehend the fact that in its inner power of adaptation the Christian religion reveals the most astonishing capacity of original religious power to the advance of culture. The problem of the Christian conception of religion and of the world is precisely the problem of understanding how the creative life of any religious personality in the past or in the present effects an advance of the culture of humanity in general.

On the basis of these relationships there arises that universal historical understanding of Christianity which will constantly increase the active capacity of religion far more effectively than does an external absoluteness which has today become lifeless and uninfluential, and which considers only the individual. It must be admitted that the paths to such an understanding lie before us as yet unsurveyed and untrodden. But this means only the greater opportunity for German theology in the next generation to establish in relation to these central problems its right to exist.